

INTRODUCTION

It was, of course, a momentous year for human rights. Perhaps more than ever previously, great events of world history were shaped during 1989 by public demands for such rights as freedom of expression, freedom of movement and freedom of assembly. Demands for human rights brought down the Berlin Wall; overturned dictatorships; helped bring the Cold War to an end; aroused hopes for peaceful change in southern Africa; elicited the crackdown in China.

The last of these brought to a sudden and painful halt one of the most exhilarating freedom movements of the century. Yet the momentum that the cause of human rights developed worldwide during the year was so great that few can doubt that the movement for democracy and human rights will soon re-emerge in China. Given events elsewhere during 1989, the crackdown has come to seem like the last cruel spasm of a dying system rather than as the beginning of a new era of tyranny. That the days of the elderly rulers of China are numbered does not prevent them from causing great suffering; but it appears unlikely that they can long perpetuate their own repressive ways.

Unfortunately, though 1989 may be recorded in the histories of this century as the year of human rights, it was not a year in which the misery caused by repression worldwide was discernibly reduced. In many parts of the world, civil wars continued in which great numbers of civilians were massacred or subjected to indiscriminate attacks; and in many countries, governments continued to murder, "disappear," torture and forcibly displace great numbers of their citizens. Political imprisonment, as such, seemed to go out of style in some countries (not including China, of course) perhaps because it is a form of abuse that can be readily measured and that invites continuing protest. But many other abuses were as pervasive as ever. The region of the world that probably was most devastated by human rights abuses during 1989 was the Horn of Africa. The internal wars that have torn apart Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan were marked by the killings of tens of thousands of noncombatants during the year; and by the starvation and forced displacement of hundreds of thousands more. In addition the peoples of those countries were victimized by virtually every imaginable abuse of human rights. Comparable abuses also took place in several countries of Asia where wars are underway, among them Afghanistan, Burma, Cambodia and Sri Lanka.

By and large, in the past, these African and Asian countries have not been the main focus of international efforts to promote human rights. Recently, however, efforts to document repression in these regions, to embarrass the governments and the guerrilla forces responsible and to generate pressure to curb abuses, have been given attention by Human Rights Watch comparable to that we have devoted to the Soviet Union, to Eastern and Central Europe and to Latin America -- the parts of the world which had been the main targets previously of our efforts, and other efforts in the United States, to promote human rights internationally. The broader focus of Human Rights Watch's work in 1989 reflects several factors in addition to the severity of abuses.

The creation of Africa Watch in 1988 was an important step. In

1989, its first full year, Africa Watch established itself as an authoritative voice on human rights in the continent. Though the staff and budget of Africa Watch are far too meager to permit it to cope with all the serious human rights abuses that are prevalent in all but a handful of the countries in its region, it was able in 1989 to deal in varying degree with Angola, Djibouti, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Mauritania, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. Though major improvements in human rights practices in these countries will only come about through sustained effort over a long period, in a few instances the impact of Africa Watch's efforts is already apparent. Indeed, it is a source of some pride to Human Rights Watch that Africa Watch has made a mark in its region far more rapidly than any of the longer established Watch Committees at a comparable stage of development. Middle East Watch was organized even more recently. It began in 1989 and its first full year of operation will be 1990. In many respects, it faces the most difficult task of all: the highly charged politics of the region; the unwillingness of some governments in the Middle East even to acknowledge that they are bound by international human rights standards; the difficulties and dangers of conducting human rights investigations in some countries; and the absence of local human rights groups with which we can work except in Israel, the Israeli-Occupied Territories, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. Even so, by the end of 1989, Middle East Watch had conducted investigations of human rights abuses in several countries and reports were being readied for publication early in 1990. Our hope is that Middle East Watch will reach a stage of development by the end of 1990 that is comparable to Africa Watch at the end of 1989.

Asia Watch was established in 1985. Its mandate covers a region that is more populous than those of all the other Watch Committees combined; and the difficulties of its task reflect also the fact that historically, culturally, linguistically and politically, the countries of its region are more diverse than any other part of the globe.

Inevitably, much of Asia Watch's work during the year was dominated by China. Asia Watch set itself the task of keeping the record of those who were imprisoned in the wake of the June 4 crackdown and of serving as their advocate to be sure that their plight was not forgotten in the inevitable period of "normalization" that would ensue. This effort was consciously patterned on the role assumed by Helsinki Watch a decade earlier which helped to make releases of political prisoners in the Soviet Union, Poland and other countries a crucial index of change. Though China was the main focus in 1989, Asia Watch also undertook significant efforts on about another dozen countries in the region.

Over the years, Americas Watch has been most intensely involved in Central America, reflecting the prominence of this region in shaping United States policy on human rights worldwide and the prevalence of gross abuses in the 1980s. In addition, Americas Watch was deeply involved in 1989 in many other countries in the Western Hemisphere, among them Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, Peru and Uruguay. Also, Americas

Watch launched its first investigations of human rights in two countries to which it had not attended previously, Venezuela and Mexico. Unfortunately, though all the countries monitored by Americas Watch (with the exceptions of Cuba and Haiti, and Chile which is in the last stages of transition as this report is being published) are usually considered "democracies," many violent abuses persist and, in the case of such countries as Brazil, Colombia, El Salvador, Peru and Guatemala, the severity of these seemed to increase during 1989.

As might be expected, the work of Helsinki Watch was most dramatically reshaped by the events of 1989. The oldest of the Watch Committees, over the years it had conducted most of its investigations by sending representatives to the Soviet Union and to Central and Eastern Europe without disclosing the purposes of their visits in advance; by attempting to elude surveillance by security officials; and by publishing reports that focused on imprisonment and extra-legal harassment. In 1989, in contrast, most Helsinki Watch missions were conducted openly; our representatives met frequently with high officials; and our reports focused on such questions as legal reform and the development of civil society.

Though the nature of Helsinki Watch's work changed, it did not diminish in significance. Rather, because of the prestige acquired by Helsinki Watch in the previous decade, it was able to play a unique role in fostering the development of institutions, laws and practices that could help to protect human rights in future years. Also, in those countries in the region in which the persecution of ethnic minorities has been a major issue -- among them Bulgaria, Romania, Turkey, Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union -- it seemed plain at year's end that the kind of human rights monitoring that Helsinki Watch previously engaged in will be required for a long time to come.

Though the suffering inflicted by human rights abuses worldwide may not have abated during 1989 if a global reckoning were possible, there were nevertheless some stunning advances. To cite just two: there was Chile, where the cruel dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet was coming to its end after sixteen years; and Czechoslovakia, where the "Velvet Revolution" turned the country upside down in the span of two weeks. It has been the source of special pleasure to Human Rights Watch to see some of our "clients" in these countries -- those we defended when they were being persecuted -- assuming high posts in the new governments. Our own part in the transformation in these countries is a source of great pride; and gives us reason to hope for transformations in some of the countries which contributed significantly to the suffering quotient in 1989.

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